CAME LITTLE JOY FOR CHRISTMAS

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Written for my family–
My gift to you this Christmas.

Chapter I

It just didn't feel like it was supposed to feel.

It was Christmas day. It was 8:00 o'clock in the morning.

It was supposed to be a happy and magical and upbeat and optimistic time when all other cares and concerns don't exist. And it was supposed to last the whole day long. But that just wasn't the way it was.

The mood was actually one of melancholy, some loneliness and some sadness.

Oh, it was not a case of concern and sorrow for all those poor souls who will do without again this year. It was not about all those unnamed and faceless children who somehow surface in massive numbers during this time of year. The ones who will not have the opportunity of finding a present with their name on it under the tree – or who will not even have a tree to put presents under. It was not about those families that will have to scrounge for a simple meal today instead of sitting down to a big holiday feast. The sadness, on this occasion, did not radiate from thoughts of those homeless in the community who will be fed a hot meal in a charity kitchen but who will then return to the streets to try to find shelter or a protected place to spread out their blankets or bedrolls for the night.

It did not even concern itself with the bigger concept of "tomorrow." What about all these same situations tomorrow–

and the next day–and the next? Ah, yes. Tomorrow! Tomorrow the media will report no more stories about these less fortunate citizens of our community. They will not request donations or issue pleas for help-because this special day will have passed. But each and every need will still be there and be just as great and just as urgent. They won't just cease to exist.

As our civilization has grown older and become more sophisticated and maybe more understanding, psychologists and psychiatrists have recognized and tell us that a few special holidays-Christmas in particular-can be very sad and depressing for quite a large number of people. All of these instances, and many more not described, are without doubt, the source of great sadness, personal introspection, soul searching and, perhaps, some feelings of shame or guilt. But as important as all these issues are and as deserving as they are of individual and societal time and attention, none of these was to blame for the way Christine felt on this particular morning. A Christmas morning that was, in fact, beautiful and sunny outside.

At this early moment of the morning she sat, fully awake and clothed. She wore a beige sweat shirt, blue jeans and pink trimmed sneakers. She sat all alone in her apartment–with plans to do nothing but a lot more of the same for the rest of the day. As the truth of her situation entrenched itself more deeply, she resigned herself to a day of study. She would start writing one of the many papers that were due after the holiday break. "It just isn't fair," she thought to herself as she reminisced for a couple of minutes about Christmases past-and about what she expected the day to be like each year.

She had always claimed Christmas day as her favorite day of the year (as do a lot of other people) and she looked forward to its coming every year with excited anticipation. But in recent years,

when it finally had arrived, it just hadn't completely measured up to what she was expecting. She didn't want to admit that fact out loud but she did secretly question, in her own mind, whether Christmas had lost some of its... well, its spirit. She thought it was OK to question that as long as she didn't have to actually let go of the belief that recent years had been flukes. She stubbornly held tightly to the hope that the day would soon be again, as it once was-truly her favorite day of the year. She just couldn't, wouldn't, didn't want to let that claim go.

Why, she wondered, is it different now? Is it because she is older? How did that make it different? The anticipation of the day had seemed to have become almost more invigorating and exciting than the day itself, somehow. Of course, the anticipation started earlier this year than it did last year-and earlier last year than the year before and so forth as she reflected backwards.

"That," she decided, "was because of the publicity blitz that started earlier and earlier each year." Communities put up their bigger and better outdoor holiday decorations earlier; decorations that were enhanced with glittering lights, recorded music and special daily events in the town square and in all the shopping malls. Merchants put up their Christmas displays earlier. They stocked holiday merchandise, extended their store hours and pushed "Get-it-while-it-lasts" sales earlier as they competed for the last few cents potential customers had to spend. Charities started their appeals and collections earlier, too, so as not to lose those last few cents to the merchants. The media started saturating the airways with seasonal music, hard luck stories, ads and special promotions earlier. "Maybe that was partly why the old feeling was not there when the day finally arrived." She thought the day itself had been made anticlimactic. "Everyone is so worn out from being pummeled with the build

up for so long they are just glad to be done with it all. Boy! That is sad!" But there was more to it than that.

Her favorite Christmases–and, no doubt, the ones on which her memories and expectations were based-occurred when she was very young. "Maybe," she thought, "it was like going back to visit your old grammar school many years after you had graduated." You remember large expansive hallways, high ceilings, big heavy classroom doors, tall drinking fountains and so forth. That's what you expect to see on your return visit but what you find are narrow hallways, standard height ceilings, regular doors, and normal drinking fountains. Actually nothing really changed at the school. The change was all in you. You grew taller and wider and saw things from a different perspective. Is that what could have happened to Christmas?

Maybe, in some ways, but that was not the whole answer either. At least Christine didn't want it to be. She remembered Christmas day lasting the whole day. It started early in the morning–actually earlier than any other regular day–when the kids just could not force their eyes to stay closed in sleep any longer. They hurriedly rose from bed and made their way into their parent's room. On the way there they made a quick detour past the Christmas tree to take a peek and be sure that presents had indeed been left there.

There were rules. Parents had established rules for Christmas morning and as much as the kids wished they didn't exist they patiently obeyed them–well, maybe not patiently but obeyed them none-the-less.

"OK! OK!" said Mom as she unfolded herself and slipped out from under the bed covers. "Calm yourselves. Wait for Dad. You know the rules: everyone gets to see what's in their stockings. That is, if anything was put into them," she teased. "After that

everyone gets dressed and we all have breakfast before anyone gets presents from under the tree."

"Aw-w-w, Mom!"

Very unreasonable rules for youngsters. Looking back, though, they made practical sense and they worked very well to heighten and extend the excitement and make it all more special.

The ritual for opening the presents stretched the time to about mid morning. After that grownups did whatever grownups do and the kids attached themselves closely to their new possessions. About the time the newness of that wore off it was time for a lunch of "snacks". Chips and dips and crackers and cheese and treats and cookies were eaten off of a little plate that you held on your lap while you sat around the coffee table in the den. How special was that?! Then a nap? Sometimes, yes. Everyone was ready.

By mid-afternoon the kids had fully figured out all the new toys and Mom and Dad sat down on the floor with them to have their workings explained. That was followed immediately by a whole-family, new-toy play time until Mom finally had to go to the kitchen to finish cooking dinner. Even then Dad continued to play on the floor with the kids. By the time dinner was over and the dishes were washed it was time to take the dog and all the overfull tummies outdoors for a walk. That was followed by bedtime and everyone hit the sack very readily. It may have been an early bedtime but no matter. It was welcomed.

And what a day that had been! Great! The whole day. But lately the day seemed like it was not a whole day anymore. And that was sad. At least Christine was sad.

She paused for a minute with a little pang of conscience. She knew all that stuff was not what Christmas was really all

about. She understood very well, the meaning of the day and she respected and observed that. Maybe her memories were a little selfish–but dog-gone-it, they were important too. At least they were to her. And besides, a case could be made that the day long celebration she remembered did fit with the meaning of the holiday.

Beyond all that, though, this year Christine's Christmas had just all come apart.

Chapter II

Christine was a first year graduate student at a major university several states and many hours from her home and parents. She shared an apartment with a girlfriend–also a grad student–who had left several days ago to travel home for the holidays. Christine was used to being on her own and was developing a strong will and an independent (maybe a little defiant) nature. It was probably somewhat a defense mechanism against homesickness and an offset to the loosened family bonds that had been stretched when she ventured out on her own.

Still, the homesickness did occasionally prevail. A streak of sentimentality too, often haunted her during times like this. But she was an adult for all practical purposes, and had been an integral part of the whole Christmas planning process this year. She understood it and had accepted it-until right up to this moment when it all snuck up and ambushed her.

She came from a relatively large family. She was the youngest of four children–two brothers and a sister. She had always returned home for the Christmas holidays though her siblings were not always able to come back for it. They had moved away in various directions across the country. Once in a while, though, one or two could and would come home with their families. But this year was planned to be different. It would be

something new for all of them and it put her right in the middle of everything–with her agreement and a building excitement.

Months ahead of time it had been decided that Christmas would be celebrated at her apartment this year. That placed all the burden of cleaning, decorating, cooking and preparing on her shoulders. It would be a challenge but it would be fun. Her parents would drive up on the 23rd–two days ahead of time. They would stay in her roommate's vacated room.

Her oldest sister would fly in with her husband and their two young children–a boy and a girl, 8 and 6 years old–on the morning of the 24th. They had another obligation with his parents, however, so this year things would have to be modified a little bit. That meant Christmas would actually be celebrated on Christmas Eve so that her sister's family could be back on a plane headed out of town the next morning. OK. That was doable. Everyone had agreed.

That was it. There would be 7 of them. Her sister and brother-in-law would stay at a local motel while their kids would spread sleeping bags out on the apartment's living room floor. All the Christmas presents would be shipped ahead of time to Christine who would warehouse them in whatever closet she could find until it was time to display them under the tree. She was not yet an accomplished cook but she started in early to plan the menus. After several phone calls home to check off this or that detail with Mom, she had purchased all the food, prepared all that she could ahead of time and had a plan of attack in hand to ready the rest of the traditional dinner at the right time. And all was going well and according to plan until the evening of the 22nd.

That evening Christine's mother told her during a late phone call, that a very dear and close friend of her father's had

unexpectedly passed away that afternoon. It was very important, for a lot of reasons, for them to attend to the bereaved family. Because of the season, the heavy travel volumes and the weather, their checking had produced only one possibility for a flight that would get them to their friend's home in time. They had made the plane reservation. They were extremely sorry but they would not be able to come for Christmas.

They would plan it again for another year and most certainly make it up to her. Christine was saddened by the news and more so because she knew her parent's friend by reputation from the stories she had heard her dad tell about him. Of course they must go for the funeral. She never thought twice about how it would impact the Christmas plans even though she spoke of them during the phone call. She assured her mother she would simply make an adjustment and would look forward to another time. It was not until after she hung up the phone and took a deep breath that she realized what it all really meant and how everything had so completely changed in a moment's time.

So, it would just be her sister's family and herself. OK that would work. She phoned her sister to explain. Her mother had just hung up with her sister so her sister already knew. It was agreed that the plan would go forward at Christine's place since all the toys and presents had already arrived and were waiting there. It was decided, too, that the motel reservations would be canceled because the two adults could now stay in the room intended for Christine's parents that had been abandoned once again. Great! It would still be a good, albeit short, reunion and everyone looked forward to seeing each other. "Meet you at the airport on the 24th, then," said Christine to her sister, "your plane arrives at 10:00 AM, right?"

"Right."

"See you then," and they hung up their phones.

Just before leaving home for the airport on the 24th to pick up her sister, Christine checked with the airlines to make sure the flight was on time. "One hour delay due to weather," she was told. She took off her coat and threw it over a chair. "Oh, well," she thought, "might as well use the time to get all the gifts out. Guess I'll go ahead and put them under the tree." She had planned to wait until later that evening to do that because the tree was not decorated. She had imagined that the kids would enjoy helping add the ornaments to it after they arrived. They still could-even if it did have presents under it.

An hour later the flight had been further delayed by thirty minutes. Because of heavy highway traffic today she decided to go ahead and start for the airport anyway. She could wait there as easily as at home. She got to the airport just at the rescheduled arrival time, hurriedly found a remote parking place, climbed onto the shuttle bus and when it opened its doors to let her off she raced into the terminal.

Looking at the big board she found yet another delay staring at her. Weather was listed as the cause. But the weather was clear and bright. The explanation was that it was snowing very heavily in the Northeast and that had prevented flights from leaving thereby causing delays all across the system. Planes were not able to be in their predetermined places at the times scheduled so the whole country was backed up.

Her sister's plane finally did arrive. But by the time they had waited for luggage, squeezed onto and off of an over-loaded shuttle bus, waited in line to exit the parking lot, and crawled along in traffic, it was four o'clock in the afternoon when they pulled up in front of Christine's apartment.

So, when it was over, the Christmas celebration this year had consisted of a hastily cooked dinner while the kids searched wildly for the gifts with their names on them. They quickly tore off wrappings, flung the new clothes aside and put the toys into play. The tree had remained undecorated but no one seemed to care. As could be expected the flight ordeal had tired everyone. The kids had been cranky and an early bedtime was unanimously agreed upon. The flight next morning was to be an early one. The plan to attend the late candle light church service was abandoned.

After a quick glass of juice and a cup of coffee the next morning, everyone had piled into the car for the trip back to the airport. Christine was now back at home and fighting off a feeling of slight resentment that was taking root inside her. She determined not to let it grow. But it wasn't fair. It was not what she had planned. It was not what she had wanted it to be. It was not at all the way Christmas was supposed to feel. "Oh, well," she sighed, "Christmas was over for this year."

So she thought.

Chapter III

Christine resigned herself to a day of school work and decided to go find the first text book she would tackle. As she tossed off the throw pillow she had been tightly clutching between her chin and both arms, untangled her crossed legs and started to climb down off the sofa, she heard a soft noise at her front door. She stopped still and listened. The noise continued and became a little louder. It sounded as if someone was trying to fit a key into the lock on the door but was having trouble getting it to do its designated job correctly.

"What in the world?" she wondered. "Who could that be?" She took a deep breath and quietly approached the door. Peering through the peep hole she spotted an old woman who seemed to be trying key after key in the door just as she had imagined. After watching her for a moment, as best the peep hole would allow, Christine decided she recognized the woman as Mrs. Whistletune from the apartment below hers. "Strange," she thought. "This has never happened before." But now feeling not the least bit threatened, she turned the lock from her side and opened the door just as another key was being fitted into the slot from the outside.

As the door swung open the woman outside raised her head quickly with mild surprise, pulled back her key and before Christine had time to utter the first sound hurriedly but gently

pushed her way into the apartment. As she did so she spoke the words, "Oh, good you're here already. But I'm running so far behind-there's so much to be finished yet. There's so much to do to get ready. Just look at this place!" She proceeded to remove her gloves, heavy coat and head scarf and place them all in the entry closet. "C'mon, dear," she continued, "you can help. After all it is already Christmas Day."

Christine had never been formally introduced to Mrs. Whistletune and had never spoken to her before. She had noticed her, on rare occasions, in the parking lot or entering the building. She was always alone and Christine had never observed her speaking to anyone. How the woman got from place to place was unknown as no car in the lot was identifiable with her. Perhaps she took advantage of the public bus that stopped on the corner a couple of blocks away.

Christine knew her name from the label on the building mailboxes and assumed that her title was Mrs. -though she had never seen a Mr. Likely he had passed away some time earlier. There had been brief comments made and overheard, from time to time, by other tenants about the woman's eccentricity. They even hinted at possibly some kind of mild dementia. Obviously, any dementia had not been severe enough so far to prevent the woman from living alone and functioning on her own-though Christine was aware that dementia could worsen rapidly and without warning on a bad day.

She decided that was probably the inspiration for the current incident at her front door. If that were the case, she quickly decided, she would be as kind and supportive as she could and just "play along" with this stranger until such moment presented itself that she could redirect her to the right apartment.

Her new guest was indeed a widowed "Mrs." Whistletune who had lived in the building since before Christine had moved into it. She had no apparent relative or at least none that lived close-by that Christine would be able to discover until a much later date. She was elderly–perhaps in her mid to late 80s but spry and moved easily and without slowness nor any other noticeable handicap when she walked. She was tall and only slightly stooped. She was no longer slender, though she retained the signs of having been in her younger years. But she had kept herself in very good physical shape.

Her formerly thin face had filled out to a rounded shape (but not pudgy) and was highlighted by her short, curly, very gray (though not totally white) hair and her large square-lens eye glasses. She was handsomely adorned with just the right shade and amount of face powder, rouge, and lipstick all perfectly applied.

She wore a subdued red and green long-sleeved seasonally patterned blouse, open at the neck, and tucked into a pair of neatly pressed and creased black dress slacks. She had on comfortable low heeled shoes. Overall she presented an attractive and comfortable appearance.

The apartment building in which these two ladies lived was one of a dozen or more in a large complex. Each building was based on a plan that housed six apartments on a total of three floors. Actually, once inside, each individual apartment was built on two levels that were connected with a short staircase (sleeping area on the upper level and living area on the lower). The main entrance to each of the six apartments opened onto a common open-air corridor–two entrances on each of the three levels.

It was an older building having been given form many years ago when costs and space conservation were not the major controlling conditions of design. The layout of Christine's top level apartment was exactly the same as that of Mrs. Whistletune's directly below hers. Walking into one was like walking into the other (except for the furnishings and decorations, of course). Mrs. Whistletune, therefore, easily made her way around Christine's apartment without disorientation. At least that's the explanation Christine decided upon when it all dawned on her later.

Again, Christine lived in the top floor apartment. Mrs. Whistletune's apartment was on the middle layer. There was a third apartment below hers on the ground floor. Some moments before her entrance into Christine's apartment, the older woman had left her rooms and walked down the street to the corner box to retrieve a morning newspaper–which had not been published on this holiday morning. On returning she had apparently lost count of the stairs she was climbing. Instead of stopping on the second floor she continued on to the top level, thinking, when she arrived, that she stood before her own front door. Having now gained entrance through it and having made herself quite at home, she started to busy herself with preparations for the Christmas day celebration–which, as she announced, she was way behind on and with which she was now soliciting Christine's help.

Chapter IV

"Help?" repeated Christine. Then remembering her plan to be supportive and to "play along" she repeated, "Oh, help! Of course! Where do we start?"

"After all," she thought to herself, "maybe she could somehow help make the day a little better one for this confused old lady."

"Well," said Mrs. Whistletune, "let's start with some breakfast. Do you know how to make cinnamon rolls?"

"Cinnamon rolls?" asked Christine startled. That was exactly the thing her family always had for Christmas day breakfast. They were easy to make ahead of time, quick and fun to eat. And you could always come back and eat more later in the day–to make up for the quick nibble you ate trying to satisfy Mom and Dad's 'breakfast before gifts' rule. That was exactly what she had planned for this morning's breakfast with her sister's family but never had the opportunity to make. "Absolutely, I know how to make cinnamon rolls. How do you know about them?"

"Why, they're one of my favorites," answered Mrs. Whistletune with a surprise in her voice. "Everyone likes them, I think."

Together they went into the kitchen, got out pre-packaged ingredients and the appropriate baking pans and together they shaped the treats and popped them in the oven. Then they put on a fresh pot of coffee.

"Now, while they bake let's do something about that tree over there," said the old woman. "It badly needs some decorations. Where did I put those ornaments?"

"Let me get them," said Christine smiling to herself. And she headed up the stairs to the bedroom to look in the closet for her single cardboard box of tree decorations. She hoped she wouldn't be too embarrassed by how skimpy the tree would look because she had purchased only a short and pretty thin tree– just to have something for her niece and nephew. It did add a nice scent to the room, too.

Returning to the living room and the tree, carrying the box, she placed it on the floor. "Let me see," she started, "I don't think we've really introduced ourselves. My name is Christine and I believe your name is Mrs. Whistletune, isn't it?"

Without looking up and without the least sign of being flustered the woman replied, "Please just call me Little Joy. That's what my daddy called me."

"OK. Joy," responded Christine. "Is that your first name?"

"Not Joy, dear. Little Joy," she said not completely answering the question.

"Little Joy?"

"Yes, it's from the story."

"Story? What story?"

The woman didn't answer. Indeed she seemed not to hear but busied herself instead with digging around inside the box of ornaments.

"These are very nice," she commented, "but you know what we must have in order to properly decorate a Christmas tree?"

"No, what?" asked Christine with some hesitation.

"Music, of course. Christmas music. There should be some around here somewhere. Can you find it?"

A look of surprise and excitement came over Christine's face. That's exactly the way they used to decorate the tree at home when she was small. There would always be Christmas music playing in the background. It had become sort of a custom. She found a radio, which was the quickest music machine she could come up with. She turned it on and tuned in a station that was playing uninterrupted Christmas music all day today. She adjusted the volume. "Wow! That's nice," she thought. She had forgotten.

She returned to the box and together they began picking little toys and trinkets on hooks out of it. Each new item would be removed from its wrapper, if it had one, held in the air, turned around and admired for a few seconds, a quick comment was often made about it and then it would be hung on the tree to fill in a blank spot. One angel figurine somewhat larger than the rest served as the tree topper. When there were no more ornaments left in the box the tree was declared finished but Christine worried to herself that it looked a little bare. Almost as if she read Christine's mind Little Joy volunteered, "My, that sure is a handsome tree. It could use one more thing though. How about if we add a string of garland?"

"Where will we get a garland?" asked Christine.

"Well, let's think about it while we try one of those cinnamon rolls. I can hardly wait."

And they poured themselves a cup of coffee, served up half a roll each and sat down at the dining room table (there was no table in the kitchen). While they were eating Little Joy told Christine to look in the cupboard and get out some popcorn. Christine knew where to look because she had bought some last week just to have on hand. After finishing their breakfast snack they popped the corn, found a couple of sewing needles

and cut a couple of long, long lengths of sewing thread. Using these tools they proceeded very carefully to sew together long strands of fluffy pop corn. When they reached the end of the length of thread they tied it off and draped the string of white corn around the decorated tree as a garland. "Perfect!" declared Little Joy.

"Perfect!" agreed Christine. She was backing away a little from her judgment about Little Joy's abilities and her control of her mental faculties. "She doesn't seem to suffer at all from dementia," she thought, "but she keeps speaking and acting like this was her home and I was her guest. So there must be some dementia here. Oh, well! She seems to be enjoying herself."

They cleaned up the kitchen and dining room and Little Joy said, "OK, the gifts are next. I didn't get them wrapped and it's very late. But we can still get them done and under the tree. Go get them, dear and the wrapping paper."

Christine was somewhat at a loss. All the gifts she had around the apartment had already been wrapped, delivered, unwrapped and played with or handled. Besides they all belonged to someone else. They were still around because they could not be taken on the plane. The plan was for Christine to gather them up and ship them to her sister next week.

She had a little bit of unused wrapping paper left on rolls but the only other available paper had been used and was now in big torn sheets wadded up and tossed in a corner waiting to be taken to the dumpster. What was she going to do? She couldn't destroy Little Joy's illusion now. Who knew what it might do to her.

After pondering a moment, she gathered up as many of the unwrapped gifts as were visible and readily accessible in the living room and put them in a pile in the middle of the room.

Then she picked up and smoothed out the larger pieces of used wrapping paper and put them into a pile. Next she went upstairs to the bedroom closet to collect the new rolls of wrapping paper, tape, ribbons and bows. As she approached the top of the stairs on her way back down Little Joy suddenly called to her.

"Stop!" she said. "When you came down those stairs earlier I noticed that one of those steps squeaked rather loudly when you stepped on it."

"Yeah. So?"

"Well, so, just for fun let's pretend that we're creating a surprise and don't want anyone to know about it yet. We don't want anyone to hear us coming down the creaky stairs."

Now Christine thought this was starting to sound more like dementia-but it did sound like fun. She knew just what to do. She did exactly what she and her brothers and sister had done many years ago at home. There was a squeaky step there too and when they wanted to sneak down stairs after their parents were in bed (to see if there were presents under the tree yet) they would climb onto the railing and slide past the noisy step.

There were only six steps in the apartment so it wasn't a long slide but it was long enough. She put the armload of wrapping materials she was carrying on the floor at the top of the stairs. Then she climbed onto the railing and slid down laughing all the way. Once at the bottom she noticed the materials they needed were still at the top of the stairs. "I'll get them," called out Little Joy. And up the stairs she went.

"Wait," yelled Christine as she started back down, "don't step on the creaky tread."

"Oh! Right!" answered Little Joy. So she put the materials back down on the floor and to Christine's amazement she too climbed onto the railing and slid down it. Christine anxiously

lunged to catch her. Both met at the bottom. Both alive with laughter.

That exercise continued for several cycles as first Christine and then Little Joy ran back up the stairs to retrieve the wrapping materials only to have to leave them there to slide down the railing. No one seemed to notice–or care for that matter–that the step creaked each time they ran up the flight just as it would on the way down. Pretty soon ingenuity prevailed and they found a way to toss all the necessary items from the top of the stairs to the bottom so, eventually, the game ran its course and they settled into what had now become a delightful chore of wrapping (or re-wrapping) gifts.

The two sat in the middle of the floor helping each other wrap the gifts that Christine had piled there. Once reapplied to a package the wrinkled paper didn't really look so bad. As a matter of fact it kind of took on a rather attractive new kind of look. It was especially unique after a ribbon was tied around it and a bow was placed on top. Each of the companions took turns writing out a name tag. Alternately Christine wrote, "To: Little Joy" and, in turn Little Joy wrote, "To: Christine." The tags were applied randomly to the wrapped packages. A large ribbon and a big bow was even attached to Christine's bicycle–the one she rode to class in nice weather. Little Joy had noticed it standing, for security reasons, inside the front door of the apartment near the coat closet. When everything was wrapped the packages were placed under the tree.

Standing back and gazing at the sight Christine was stirred with emotion. Situated as it was in the mix of streaming sunlight from the window and the resulting shadows of the room, the little tree, with its angel topper and popcorn garland and gorged with colorfully wrapped gifts, immediately put her in a spirit of

relaxed calm and quiet happiness. For a moment she forgot her current self-assigned task of overseeing the mental stability and holiday enjoyment of a demented old lady. She allowed herself the brief luxury of falling backward into the overstuffed chair and sat stretched out with her feet spread far out in front of her. And she just stared. But not for long.

Little Joy had poured herself another cup of coffee, returned to the living room with it and was starting to clean up the mess left from the wrapping project. Christine quickly rose and joined in the chore. By this time it was approaching noon. Neither had eaten much as a breakfast and some hunger pangs were starting to make their presence known. Christine took the initiative.

"Little Joy," she said, "I'm getting a little hungry. We've had a busy morning and it's time for a break. You just sit and relax for a while and I'll get out some lunch snacks." Little Joy smiled. That sounded good to her and she slumped down in the chair Christine had just vacated.

Christine found the ingredients, pulled out the pot, placed it on the stove and proceeded to mix up a tomato-based vegetable drink. It would be served hot in a mug. It was one of the more recent traditions her family had adopted and loved. Again, she had planned to serve it to her sister's family but it somehow got left out of the shortened celebration the day before. While the drink was warming on the stove (and its aroma started filling the apartment) she put together a plate of crackers with some cheese, slices of sausage, some green olives (the kind with the little red pimentos stuffed inside) and some small sweet pickles.

She carried all this on a tray into the living room and over to the chair where Little Joy was sitting. The old woman immediately perked up, though Christine thought maybe she

had caught her at the end of a quick cat-nap. So much activity in such a short time span had to be tiring for her.

They sat and sipped the warm brew and nibbled on the snacks and just kind of recharged a little bit. Still not quite finished with her drink the older woman sat suddenly upright and announced that it was high time those presents were opened. She couldn't stand the suspense any longer. That took Christine completely by surprise. After all it hadn't been that long since they had finished wrapping them. Obviously, they both knew what was inside each wrapper and what had been assigned to whom by the name written on the tag. There would be–could be–no surprises upon opening them so how much suspense could there be in anticipation?

Actually, Christine had assumed that maybe the wrapping would be the end of the exercise and that the packages would remain arranged under the tree as sort of a snap shot or a point frozen in time of this Christmas day. She was wrong, however, and she quickly became aware that Little Joy was truly excited about the prospect of opening gifts. She really was in a state of anticipation of discovering what was concealed inside each colorful package. So they sat down on the floor beside the tree facing each other.

"OK," proclaimed Christine, "let's dig in."

"No, wait," insisted Little Joy. "We have to take turns and open them one at a time. That way Mother can see what we each received and make a list of who each one came from. That way we won't forget and we'll know who to write thank-you notes to later. That way we won't overlook any and forget to thank someone."

"Amazing!" mused Christine to herself. That was exactly the way they had done it at home when she was small and that was exactly the explanation her mother had given for the procedure.

"Of course, we're both grown up now and we can keep track for ourselves," replied Christine as she perpetuated the charade.

"That's true, dear, but this way allows everyone to see what everyone else receives and each gift becomes twice as special and twice the fun."

There was no arguing with that logic so in they started. Christine quickly found a package that had Little Joy's name on it and handed it to her. She then sat back and watched as it was opened with excitement. The process was repeated as Little Joy then found a package with Christine's name on it and handed it to her. The repetition continued as Little Joy opened a book; Christine opened a sweater. A new doll was opened, a soccer ball, a board game and so forth until the room was once again full of wadded up used wrapping paper and no gift remained under the tree.

And through it all Christine was surprised to find that she was really having fun. She enjoyed doing this because Little Joy was so excited and having so much fun unwrapping the gifts and discovering, as if for the first time, what was inside.

"Oh, my," exclaimed Little Joy, "why I have one more gift than you do."

"That's alright," chuckled Christine. "It doesn't matter."

"My goodness, yes. It does," worried the older lady. "Oh! I almost forgot." She reached for her purse, rummaged around inside it for a minute and withdrew a small package wrapped in one of the same papers that Christine had provided for the larger packages. It was encircled with a narrow ribbon and contained a tag announcing To: Christine. "This is a little something I had

made especially for you," Little Joy explained. "I hope you like it."

Christine's eyes got big. Her astonishment was overwhelming–not so much at the present itself but at Little Joy's proclamation. When had she been anywhere that she could have gotten something crafted? How had she previously known Christine's name? How could she have known in advance about this moment? How had she wrapped it and put a tag on it without Christine noticing? How had she kept her wits about her long enough to have accomplished all of that? Christine reached for the gift slowly and forced a smile while stuttering something like, "thank you," and something like, "you shouldn't have," and something like, "what is this all about?" all at once.

Christine opened the tiny box and pulled out of it a small woodcarving that did indeed look hand made. "It was one of many identical items on a display rack at the corner drug store," she convinced herself. "Today's technologies can often make mass produced things look like originals." It had a beautiful sun painted on it rising over a mountain top. And it contained, in small gold lettering, the words "Lo, I am with you always".

Overall it was a nice gesture and a cute trinket but her first impression was that it was not something particularly special–except that it had been presented as such by Little Joy. She decided it had not cost a lot and so it would be alright to accept from this recent stranger who she imagined probably had limited resources.

As she opened her mouth to offer a proper thank you, the giver scooted across the floor and snuggled up to her side and took the small gift. "Look," she said excitedly, "It's got our initials on it."

"What?"

"Yes. See, here down at the bottom. See here's a little 'J' and 'C'," she said as she pointed out the miniature letters on the bauble. "Our initials–mine and yours." And she handed it back to Christine.

Christine looked at the initials but before she could conjure any type of impression Little Joy had grabbed the soccer ball. She sat on the floor bouncing it between her legs that she had spread wide apart. The small wooden gift was hurriedly put aside without notice of where it was laid. Christine sat down on the floor, faced the woman, placed the souls of her shoes flat against those of Little Joy, and gestured to roll the ball toward her. The next quarter of an hour was spent rolling or bouncing the ball back and forth between the two while occasionally scooching a few feet farther apart from each other. And for some reason laughing giddily together as all this unfolded.

Next they played with the new doll and dressed and redressed it in the various outfits that had been included in its box. They read a story together from one of the young reader books and they opened one of the board games and played it to a draw. All the while they enjoyed each other's company immensely and paid no attention to the time or to anything else going on around them.

Finally the afternoon grew late and they agreed it was time for dinner. Fortunately, Christine had purchased, and necessarily prepared, lots of food in anticipation of a big dinner that turned out not to be so big the day before. There were lots of left-overs. She busied herself pulling them from the refrigerator and making them ready to put back in the oven–not for cooking this time, but just to warm up. It would not take so long. Little Joy helped where she could and it was she who set the table in the dining room.

While the food was warming and there were a few minutes of bright daylight left outside they decided to maneuver the "new" bicycle through the front door, down the stairs and into the parking lot. There they took turns riding the bike. Little Joy tried to remember how to keep her balance. Christine tried not to show her up or make her feel bad by pretending to lose her balance occasionally, too. They had both heard that once you learn you never forget how to ride but they decided there must have been some invisible bumps in the pavement.

That was the reason, they agreed, each had to re-familiarize herself with the proper way to stay vertical. It did not take long before each was actually doing quite well and each in turn took short rides around the empty and deserted lot. It was the waning moments of some beautiful, clear sunlight and the air was fresh and starting to become crisp. That combined with the earlier playtime put the finishing touches on a really special afternoon and a new friendship. It also served to pique a couple of appetites. As they wrestled the bike back up the stairs and opened the door to Christine's apartment the smell of their dinner met them full force and pulled them inside.

It was pretty much a traditional dinner menu that truly was a feast even if left over and warmed up. Both ate until they could eat no more. Before they stood up to leave the table, however, Little Joy insisted that they must read the Christmas story. That was tradition, too and "...since they were in her house," she said, "it was mandatory."

Christine did not argue nor did she want to. She left the table to fetch the book, returned and opened it to the chapter named after Luke. At the woman's request she began to read. She reached the part in the story where an angel's words stated "I bring you glad tidings of great joy."

She paused to take a breath but before she could begin again the woman said, "That's it. You see? That's the story I told you about. My daddy used to read that story at dinner time on Christmas and when I was still pretty small-but old enough to understand-he stopped at that spot and said to me, 'That's you. You're my joy. I think I'll call you my Great Joy from now on.' I told him he couldn't call me that because the angel in the story said there already was a Great Joy. But I told him I could be a little joy. 'Then that's what you'll be,' he said. 'You will always be my Little Joy.' And that's what he always called me from then on–at least when he wasn't angry with me." Little Joy closed her eyes for a minute and smiled. Christine understood and did her best not to tear up a little.

Following the story and the pie the two cleared the table, cleaned and put away the dishes, and decided they needed one last walk outside in the fresh air to settle their dinners. It was completely dark out now except for a few overhead lamps around the parking lot and a few stars that blinked through thickening clouds. Both bundled up and Little Joy took her purse along. They descended the stairs and walked arm-in-arm all the way around the whole large apartment complex meeting no one the whole time they walked. Christine could tell from her gate and general demeanor that Little Joy was getting tired quickly and starting to wind down.

On the way back to their building the most wonderful thing happened. It started to snow. It was just an ever so light, slow, gentle fall of big flakes and, of course, none stuck to the ground or remained after they landed. Snow did occasionally fall in this area. But snow had not been forecast and not even the slightest chance had been predicted. What a perfect end to a whole-day-long of Christmas. What started as a lost day then turned

into a very strange day was now ending as a very happy and meaningful Christmas day.

With the snow the temperature dropped a little more and Christine hurried Little Joy back to the building and into the entryway as fast as it was possible to do so. On this trip up the stairs however, she stopped on the second landing, nudged Little Joy's arm in the direction of her own apartment and stood with her as the door was unlocked and swung open.

"Good night, dear," said Mrs. Whistletune in a very reduced voice. In spite of her weariness her eyes seemed to continue to twinkle. "Thank you for a beautiful day. I'll be sure to share it with you again next year." And she disappeared inside as the door closed behind her. Christine heard the key turn in the lock.

Christine proceeded up the next flight of stairs, and entered her own apartment. She discovered, now that she was free from her obligation to Mrs. Whistletune, that she too, was extremely tired. The apartment seemed empty and lonely once again but Christine did not dwell on that or on any of the day's activities. She turned out the lights and headed straight for bed.

Chapter V

On waking the next morning Christine lay in bed for a long time staring at the ceiling. She was going over and over the day before in her mind trying to understand and make sense of it all. She finally gave up the struggle and rolled off the edge of the bed. She headed for the kitchen to start a pot of coffee. On her way her bare foot struck something hard underneath a pile of wrapping paper. She stooped down, rummaged through the paper and pulled out the little wooden sunrise trinket with the initials on it. She looked at it for a couple of seconds, added it to her mental list of current incomprehensibles and tossed it into the box that would house the tree ornaments when they got put away until next year.

Still haunted by it all she knew she had to bring it to a conclusion in her own head in order to move on. So she summarized the day before as a good deed when she helped a confused old woman find and celebrate Christmas. It was a nice thing to do. It was the right thing to do. She felt good about herself.

From that day forward she never caught sight of Mrs. Whistletune again - in the parking lot or around the building. She thought about stopping and knocking on her door but she was afraid she might somehow embarrass her – so she never did. A few months later she heard from neighbors in the

complex that the old woman had passed away one night in her sleep. "Guess we won't share Christmas again next year after all," thought Christine.

When a strange car drove up pulling a trailer she decided that someone was moving. When the car's occupants started making trips into and out of the apartment below hers she became aware that they were either family or friends of Mrs. Whistletune's and were cleaning out the apartment. She felt a necessity to drop in on them long enough to express her condolences. She thought they might like to know how happy the woman had been during her last Christmas – which was after all, the only period in the woman's life Christine could speak about.

The movers, it turned out, were the last living sister and brother-in-law who lived in another state and who had kept in touch with the elderly woman by telephone – a call every other day. They knew she was developing some kind of dementia and were concerned but until it could be proven that she was incapable of living on her own they had no power to persuade her otherwise. They recalled Christmas day and explained that they had tried all day long to phone her. When they finally reached her late that night they believed she was doing OK.

"No, she didn't mention anything about what she had been doing all day or how she had celebrated Christmas. Just wanted to get to bed," they said.

"Little Joy?" they puzzled. "Nope, never heard that description for her before and never heard Daddy use it as a name for her. Daddy was a good and pleasant man but I don't recall he had any special nicknames for any of his children. If he had had one for her they had never heard it used." But they were amused by the story Christine told of the time she shared with their sister and expressed their gratitude for her caring.

That was it. That could have been the end of Little Joy - but it was not.

Chapter VI

What really happened that Christmas day did not come completely into perspective for Christine until many months later. The first discussion of plans for the next year's celebration was the catalyst. And when it hit her Christine had to stop dead in her tracks for a few moments and catch the short breath that had been suddenly yanked from her. She fought back a tear or two at the realization and then just beamed from ear to ear.

Every Christmas from that point on Little Joy did in fact share Christmas with Christine and later with Christine's own family. She was never visibly apparent and no one ever had a conversation with her but she was there. Christine didn't know how. She could not explain it. But there was no doubt in her mind that Little Joy always paid them a visit at Christmas time.

She had been asked several times by her young daughter about the little wooden tree ornament that Christine always wrapped and put away carefully. The next year it would be just as carefully unwrapped again and hung on the tree. But she had never given her daughter – or her husband, for that matter - a good explanation. She knew she would have to someday.

No one had ever asked her why, after grace was said before Christmas dinner – but before the Amen - she always hastily added very softly but audibly "and thank you for sharing Little Joy with us this Christmas." Everyone just assumed it was a nice

little idiosyncrasy of hers and it was fine with them. No one ever noticed she said "... sharing Little Joy ..." They just assumed she said – or meant to say - "...sharing a little joy..."

But the year finally arrived when all that changed. When her daughter asked her why she always added that sentence to the end of the prayer she knew that the time had come. She knew she would spend the rest of the evening – after dinner – retelling in full detail - and reliving - the story of a very special Christmas when she thought she was helping an old woman get through a difficult time. But in fact an old woman had turned the tables on her and helped her turn her own difficult day into one with a little joy.

Made in the USA

"I was mysteriously intrigued until I was finished with this angelic tale. I was left satisfied and encouraged." Jim Kelly DDS

An old woman and a college student help each other get through the difficulties and loneliness of a Christmas Day that had otherwise just fallen apart.

An enjoyable seasonal story with a few unexpected surprises.

O8-ALK-377

ISBN 9781449541972
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